

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN BYZANTIUM AND THE ARABS

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THE object of the Symposium was to represent the diversity of the relationships between the Byzantine and Arab Empires and cultures, and to indicate possible new openings and perspectives for the study of these in different areas of thought and activity. In a brief introduction Professor Gibb (Harvard University) outlined the plan adopted for the Symposium, beginning with relations in space and time, followed by those in selected cultural fields. The former were commonly viewed only from the military angle, and it was hoped that the papers to be presented would correct this too-exclusive approach. The latter set some delicate problems, inasmuch as adaptations on either side were here, even more than elsewhere, concealed by the local coloring which they took on.

Professor Irfan Kavar (University of Indiana) surveyed the period from Constantine to Heraclius as an era in the history of Arab-Byzantine relations with a number of characteristic features. In their military aspects, Byzantium established a relation with the limitrophe Arabs which made of them *symmachoi*, allies who received from the Empire the *annona* and in return watched the *limes* against the raids of the nomads, as well as participating effectively in the campaigns of the Army of the Orient against the Sasanids. Culturally, Byzantium dominated the Arabs, and of the three constituents of Byzantium—the Christian, the Roman, and the Greek—the first proved to be the most vital; indeed, this was the only period in their history when the Arabs developed a mature Christian culture. Byzantium was also heavily involved in the Ethiopian conquest of South Arabia in the sixth century and the growing importance of the West-Arabian trade route, which contributed to the rise of Mecca to its dominant position in Arabia before the rise of Islam.

Professor Marius Canard (Professor Emeritus, University of Algiers and Visiting

Scholar at Dumbarton Oaks), in a comprehensive analysis of Arab-Byzantine relations in Western Asia after the rise of Islam, pointed to the inhibiting effects of the continuous, fluctuating, and finally inconclusive warfare between the two Empires upon relationships in other spheres. Warfare itself, of course, produced some interchanges of strategies and tactics, especially among the opposing frontier forces. Even such more pacific relations as embassies were generally occasioned, directly or indirectly, by military circumstances, the exchange of prisoners, for example. Nevertheless, although the Arab conquests cut at the root the close economic nexus between Egypt and Syria and the Empire, enough evidence had been produced of continuing commercial relations to warrant further study of this aspect.

In discussing Arab-Byzantine relations in Crete and the Aegean area, Mr. George C. Miles (The American Numismatic Society) chose as his point of departure the life and times of St. Luke the Steiriot and the great monastery of Hosios Loukas in Phocis. The Arab occupation of Crete early in the ninth century laid the Aegean islands and the coasts of Greece open to raids and depredations which resulted in such dislocations of the Greek population as those which dictated the circumstances of St. Luke's adventurous career. Of the internal history of Crete during the Arab occupation we know little, but fresh numismatic evidence has been of some help in reconstructing the genealogy of those amirs. After Nikephoros Phokas' reconquest of Crete in 961, and thereafter for two centuries, Arab artistic influence penetrated the Greek mainland especially in the form of architectural ornament, and above all in the adoption of motifs derived from the Kufic script. In an impressive selection of his own slides, Mr. Miles illustrated several categories of these borrowed elements in Byzantine

churches throughout Greece, but with special emphasis on the monastery of Hosios Loukas, where the various motifs in different media are particularly well represented.

Arab-Byzantine relations in the central Mediterranean were discussed by Professor Francesco Gabrieli (University of Rome). After a comparative evaluation of the three classical works on this subject, by Amari, Gay, and Vasiliev, and some briefer references to more recent studies on specific aspects, he presented an analysis of the general historical significance of the conflict between Greeks and Arabs in Sicily and South Italy. Neither of the two contestants succeeded in gaining such an absolute supremacy in sea-power as would have enabled him to crush his rival and establish a firm hold on Italian soil. On the contrary, a kind of balance was always maintained between them in the Central Mediterranean, which was never so closed to trade and civil navigation as Pirenne's theory would postulate. The positive fruits of the long and apparently sterile struggle appeared in the brilliant syncretistic civilization of the Norman State.

The first paper on cultural relations, dealing with the evolution of Islamic Art from Byzantine themes, was given by Professor Oleg Grabar (University of Michigan), and illustrated by slides. He discussed firstly the ways in which the material setting inherited from Byzantium by the Arabs, more especially the Umayyads, affected the growth of an Arab art, and secondly the ways in which a Muslim iconography (or lack thereof) related to Byzantine practices. In both parts, his paper aimed to show not so much the exact number of themes taken from one culture to the other as the "systems of association" between forms and functions and between images and needs which Byzantine art imposed on the new Islamic culture.

Turning to literature and philosophy, Professor G. E. von Grunebaum (University of California) described the cleavage between Byzantium and the Arabs in these fields (and beyond) as due essentially to the different principles of selection applied to the classical heritage. Conscious cultural connections between the two areas were actually less significant than the persistence of shared attitudes and concerns. To the eleventh century, con-

vergences result from the labors of the "intellectuals"; after the collapse of Manzikert and the simultaneous reconstruction of Sunnite Islam the ever more pronounced similarities of mentality and interests are the consequence of the breakthrough on both sides of the language curtain of the same motifs and aspirations of popular piety and taste.

Professor Romilly J. H. Jenkins (Dumbarton Oaks), discussing the exchange of diplomatic missions between Constantinople and Damascus or Baghdad, noted the same elaboration and cross-influence at both courts. It is instructive to compare the Arabic accounts of the reception of a Byzantine embassy in 917 with Constantine VII's account of that of an Arab embassy in 946. No permanent diplomatic posts were maintained in either capital, but embassies were frequent on both sides, either to congratulate a new sovereign, or to conclude a treaty, or to negotiate an exchange of prisoners. They were headed by men of high birth and substance. The future patriarch Tarasios was probably sent on one in 775, and certainly John the Grammarian and Photius were sent in 829 and 855. A less publicized duty of the envoy was to collect intelligence, a function supplemented by a host of unofficial secret agents, often in the guise of merchants or pilgrims, whose activities were not always circumvented by the vigilant and efficient Byzantine and Saracen counter-espionage services. Although our knowledge of these is necessarily fragmentary, enough material exists on which to base an authoritative study.

The Byzantine views of Islam as a religious phenomenon were analyzed by the Rev. Professor John Meyendorff (St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary). From the eighth century onward, references to Islam are frequently found in theological treatises, imperial letters, liturgical texts, and hagiographical literature, either for polemical or for apologetic purposes. From all of these, it is clear that the Byzantines never succeeded in understanding the religious substance of Islam, and perhaps did not even try to do so. Thus the two spiritual worlds remained fundamentally separate, although Byzantine texts may on occasion furnish some informa-

tion on contemporary Arab beliefs, traditions, and religious tendencies.

For the other side, Professor Gibb noted that, contrary to what might have been expected, the Arab governments showed little special hostility to the Orthodox Church, but remained disdainfully aloof. The major opposition came from the dissident confessions, which seized the opportunity to get their own back. Under the Umayyads the Monophysites, led by George, "bishop of the Arabs," gained a dominating position among the Christian communities in Syria and Mesopotamia. Under the Abbasids, the Nestorians were especially influential, and their patriarch was recognized as the head of the Christian communities. The Orthodox Patriarchates in Syria and Egypt were maintained, the necessity of obtaining confirmation of each new patriarch forming a useful weapon in the hands of the authorities; the Patriarchate of

Seleucia on the other hand was banished to Tashkent. The early Fatimids, however, showed some favor to the Orthodox, while the anti-Christian edicts of the erratic caliph al-Hakim were directed not solely at the Holy Sepulchre and other Orthodox churches, but against all the Christian communities, excepting only the monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai.

Before the close of the eleventh century, the Arabs of Iraq and Syria and the Greeks of Anatolia were, alike, falling under the domination of one new people, the Turks, and those of Sicily under another, the Normans. With these invasions, the chapter of history to which this Symposium was devoted came to an end. It is an ironical reflection that only under these new masters were the aloofness, self-sufficiency, and mutual misunderstanding of Greek and Arab resolved to some extent in an ultimate synthesis.

Editor's Note: The Symposium was under the direction of Professor Hamilton A. R. Gibb. For the papers by M. Cannard, G. C. Miles, F. Gabrieli, O. Grabar, G. E. von Grunebaum, and J. Meyendorff, see the present volume.